

Zitkála-Šá was a Yankton Dakota Sioux writer, translator, musician, educator, and political activist. She is also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin. Zitkála-Šá was born in 1876 on the Yankton Indian Reservation in South Dakota. She lived with her mother and brother on the reservation until 1884. That year, she and several other Yankton children began to attend to Indiana Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. In 1887 she left the school and returned to the Yankton Reservation to live with her family. Several of her works talk about her struggle with cultural identity and being torn between two cultures. In 1891, Zitkála-Šá returned to Wabash to continue her Euro-American education and eventually attended Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana and the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. She taught violin at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania and began writing and translating folk tales and stories from her own life while teaching. She worked at the Bureau of Indian Affairs office at Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota, moved to the Uintah-Ouray reservation in Utah, collaborated with professor and composer William F. Hanson to write the first opera co-authored by a native American, and then relocated to Washington, D.C. where she wrote political works advocating for civil rights for Native Americans, including the right for all Native Americans to vote. She died in Washington, D.C. in 1938 at the age of sixty-one.

Excerpt from [“School Days of an Indian Girl”](#) by Zitkala Sa/Gertrude Bonnin. Published in [Atlantic Monthly](#). Volume 85, [Issue 508](#), February 1900.

Late in the morning, my friend Jude win gave me a terrible warning. Judewin knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judewin said, “We have to submit, because they are strong,” I rebelled.

“No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!” I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes, — my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hall I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. The windows were covered with dark green curtains, which made the room very dim. Thankful that no one was there, I directed my steps toward the corner farthest from the door. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judewin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath, and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Someone threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I

resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.